

**STATEMENT OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

**RATIFICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL TREATY ON PLANT
GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**

[Senate Treaty Document 11019]

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (“the Treaty”).

Mr. Chairman, the security of U.S. agriculture depends on the stability and high yield of U.S. crops which, in turn, is contingent on the continual development of new crop varieties. The crops we grow are always under threats from diseases, pests, droughts and floods. Globalization has acted to bring continuous threats of new pests and diseases into crop producing areas, which can devastate crops or reduce yields. Our food security will in part depend upon breeding new crops that need less water but still produce high yields. To develop these new crop varieties, breeders and researchers require access to a broad spectrum of “genetic raw material” containing key traits such as immunity to virulent pests and diseases. Each nation—including the United States—is dependent on many other nations for access to that genetic material. Consequently, facilitating international access to what is termed “plant genetic resources for is a critical priority for the United States and the entire international community.

Over time, U.S researchers have found it increasingly difficult to gain access to plant breeding materials in other countries. Meanwhile, technological advances significantly improved our ability to identify, characterize and utilize agricultural genetic resources, thereby increasing the importance of access to gene pools outside of our borders. By establishing a stable legal framework for international germplasm exchanges, this Treaty benefits both research and commercial interests in the United States. The Treaty also promotes global food security through the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

The centerpiece of the Treaty is the establishment of a “Multilateral System” for access to, and benefit-sharing regarding, certain plant genetic resources to be used for research, breeding and training for food and agriculture. The scope of the Treaty’s coverage currently encompasses genetic resources of 64 crops and forages that are maintained by International Agricultural Research Centers or that are under the management and control of national governments and in the public domain. Access to covered germplasm is granted through a Standard Material Transfer Agreement, a

contract that defines the terms of access and benefit-sharing. Furthermore, the Treaty provides a mechanism for enabling developing countries to acquire the capacities needed to conserve and sustainably use plant germplasm essential for food security, including facing the global challenges associated with climate change.

The Treaty entered into force in 2004 and now has 120 Parties. The United States signed the Treaty in 2002. The President forwarded it to the Senate for consideration in July 2008, after negotiations of the Standard Material Transfer Agreement were completed. Throughout the Treaty negotiating process, the United States was firmly committed to creating a system that promotes U.S. and global food security and protects U.S. access to genetic resources held outside our borders. The United States also sought to protect the ability of the International Agricultural Research Centers—the institutions largely responsible for the “Green Revolution” which saved billions of lives—to continue to genetically improve crops that underpin global food security. The Treaty enjoys broad stakeholder support, including support for U.S. ratification from several prominent industry organizations such as the American Seed Trade Association, the National Farmers Union, the American Soybean Association, the National Association of Wheat Growers, the National Corn Growers Association, the Biotechnology Industry Organization and the Intellectual Property Owners of America.

Mr. Chairman, the Treaty is consistent with existing U.S. practice and may be implemented under existing U.S. authorities. No statutory changes are needed. The Agricultural Research Service, in its capacity as manager of the National Plant Germplasm System, would play a major role in domestic Treaty implementation. For more than 50 years, the U.S. National Plant Germplasm System has distributed samples of germplasm to plant breeders and researchers worldwide and free of charge, thereby already contributing significantly to the global effort to safeguard plant germplasm for food security, now and in the future. Consequently, the United States is already in compliance with key provisions of the Treaty, and ratification would not entail major policy or technical changes to current National Plant Germplasm System operations.

Mr. Chairman, the United States Department of Agriculture has long been recognized as the world leader in plant germplasm conservation and distribution. If the U.S. ratified the Treaty, U.S. entities would gain guaranteed access to plant genetic resources covered by the Treaty. As I have highlighted before, global access to plant genetic resources is critical to the efforts of researchers and plant breeders to develop new crop varieties that are more nutritious, are resistant to pests and diseases, show improved yields, and are better able to tolerate environmental stresses. The emergence of new biotechnology-based plant breeding tools only heightens the importance of open access to plant genetic resources.

Ratification of the Treaty would not only underscore our continued leadership but it would also help U.S. farmers and researchers sustain and improve their crops and promote food security for future generations, not only in the United States but globally. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for this opportunity to convey our support for ratification. I would be happy to answer any questions.